Latino Water Coalition press release

MARIO SANTOYO: Flood releases tell a tale of water storage needs

Posted at 12:00 AM on Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2011
By Mario Santoyo

At 1 p.m. on the day after Christmas, a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation operator stepped to the controls at Friant Dam, made some adjustments and sent a flow of several hundred cubic feet per second into the San Joaquin River from storm-swollen storage in Millerton Lake. Two days later, the release was boosted into the thousands of cubic feet per second.

It was the beginning of what could be a significant flood release but was hardly unique. During and after the drenching December storms, flood releases were ordered to begin at dams on rivers from one end of the Central Valley to the other.

Some, such as at Folsom and Shasta dams, amounted to tens of thousands of cubic feet per second. Others were initially modest. All, of course, are an important damage-preventing ingredient in Central California's water supply infrastructure.

Effective flood management has doubtlessly prevented many millions of dollars in flood losses from occurring. Releasing water from reservoirs that encroach into designated flood control storage space is both necessary and prudent.

At the same time, any flow sent down a river during a flood release is water that is no longer available to its service area or, to a large extent, the environment. The reason that water needs to be released for flood management boils down to not enough storage capacity to capture high flows generated by heavy rain and snow in Sierra watersheds.

Unfortunately, those high flows in big-water years also represent a substantial portion of California's supply cushion. More surface water availability for municipal and agricultural users eases supply constraints caused by drought. It also translates into less dependence upon groundwater.

It would seem to make sense in this perpetually water-short state to want to capture additional excess storm runoff -- clearly surplus to any immediate need with everything already sopping wet -- for use during dry months and years. Instead, we are continuing to lose valuable water because our existing reservoirs are insufficient to do the job.

Detractors to new surface storage development, who include many environmental advocates, view dams as too costly and environmentally degrading. They suggest that the Valley, its farmers and communities could meet their water supply needs with stricter water conservation and groundwater recharging.

Conservation and more groundwater recharge are important but most Valley agriculture is already using water at top efficiency levels. Groundwater recharge and water banking are terrific tools but, on their own, they work slowly. Canal sizes limit the amount of water that can be conveyed to recharge sites and, during a flood situation, conveyance capacity is often scores of times less than reservoir inflows, leaving river flood releases as the only option.

This frequently occurs with the San Joaquin River, and the Friant-Kern and Madera canals, because Millerton Lake's 520,500 acre-feet of storage is too small to adequately handle what the watershed can generate.

The California Latino Water Coalition supports additional surface water storage as a vital part of the state's water infrastructure bond package on the November 2012 ballot. We favor the bond proposal's bipartisan comprehensive approach. It would address long-term water needs and shorter-term problem fixes. These would also result in the Delta "fixes" that are so vital to returning adequate, consistent water supplies to more than three million acres of farmland and 25 million California residents.

The price? A big investment, to be sure. The result? Far surer water supply prospects for the future.

Bond urged to boost Valley water storage

Posted at 11:55 PM on Monday, Jan. 17, 2011
By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Lawmakers, farm water officials and others said Monday that storms may have ended the drought, but the state's water crisis continues. In the last month, about 100,000 acre-feet of water had to be released because Millerton Lake is too small to contain it.

That's equivalent to about an eight-month supply of water for the city of Fresno flowing to the Pacific Ocean, they said. A larger reservoir at Temperance Flat, upstream of Millerton, is needed to capture more water for crops, San Joaquin River restoration, ground-water recharge and growing cities.

A half-dozen speakers delivered that message in front of Friant Dam, where water continues to pour out the release valves into the river, as it has for weeks. The gathering was organized by the California Latino Water Coalition.

Speakers included Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, state Sen. Michael Rubio, D-Bakersfield, and Assembly Members Henry T. Perea, D-Fresno, and David Valadao, R-Hanford.

They reminded voters that an $11 billion state water bond has been delayed until 2012, and said it needed to be approved. The bond measure includes $3 billion for storage, including dams and underground water banking. Temperance Flat near Fresno is a contender for the storage money.

Costa said people shouldn't be lulled into thinking the state's water problems have been washed away by the storms.

"God, thank you for the rain," he said. "But it's less useful because we don't have the capacity to capture as much water as we could."

The Fresno County Farm Bureau and the Nisei Farmers League came to Friant and supported the message. Others included the statewide Association of California Water Agencies and the California Conference of Carpenters, a labor organization.

Daniel Curtin, director of the carpenter group, said a larger reservoir would mean more jobs. He also said the environment would benefit from the additional water, which could be used for restoration releases.

"We can have it all if we do it right," he said.